

Message Text

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AMCONSUL BIEN HOA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAIGON 1284

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: OPS VS

SUBJECT: MARKHAM STORY ON THE FALL OF PHUOC BINH

REF: STATE 023903

1. MARKHAM STORY ON FALL OF PHUOC BINH DOES NOT SEEM TO US A BALANCED ACCOUNT. STORY RELIES HEAVILY ON QUOTATIONS FROM MILITARY MEN WHO TOOK PART IN THE DEFENSE OF PHUOC BINH. ALL WHO HAVE EVER LIVED THROUGH SUCH AN EXPERIENCE KNOW HOW LIMITED A VIEW OF THE OVER-ALL SITUATION ANY ONE PARTICIPATING IN A BATTLE CAN HAVE AND HOW NATURAL IT IS, ESPECIALLY IF THE ACTION IS A DEFEAT, FOR SOLDIERS TO EMERGE FROM BATTLE WITH HIGHLY CRITICAL VIEWS OF THEIR OWN COMMAND AND EXAGGERATED OPINION OF THE ENEMY'S PERFORMANCE. A DISCERNING REPORTER WOULD HAVE MADE ALLOWANCE FOR THIS FACTOR AND WOULD HAVE ATTEMPTED TO PIECE TOGETHER A ROUNDED ANALYSIS.

2. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT SOUTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY SOURCES TOLD MARKHAM OF INDECISIVENESS AND CONFUSION AT THE HIGHEST COMMAND LEVELS, BUT THIS STATEMENT IS WHOLLY AT VARIANCE WITH WHAT WE KNOW. THE GVN COMMAND NEVER HAD ANY DOUBT THAT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE INTENDED TO TAKE THE TOWN NOR DID THEY LACK APPRECIATION OF THE SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF ITS LOSS. MOREOVER, THE COMMAND WAS AWARE OF THE SIZE AND QUALITY OF THE NVA FORCES ENGAGED. FROM THE OUTSET, CONFIDENTIAL

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THE DECISION NOT TO REINFORCE THE TOWN WAS BASED ON THE SOUND

STRATEGY

THAT SUPPLY TO THE REMOTE PROVINCE, AS WELL AS THE SIZE OF THE FORCE THAT WOULD BE NEEDED TO MATCH THE COMMUNISTS, WOULD POSE IMMENSELY DIFFICULT PROBLEMS. THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF COMMAND WERE CONCERNED WITH FACTORS SUCH AS RESCUE OF THE LARGEST POSSIBLE NUMBER OF SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS FROM PHUOC LONG PROVINCE AND THE NEED TO BALANCE THE COST OF AN ALL-OUT EFFORT TO HOLD PHUOC BINH, ESPECIALLY GIVEN THE FACT THAT RESUPPLY MUST BE BY AIR, AGAINST THE NEED FOR AVAILABLE GVN FORCES FOR HIGHER PRIORITY PURPOSES NEARER SAIGON IN THE FUTURE. SUCH DECISIONS HAVE OF COURSE BEEN MADE VERY MUCH MORE DIFFICULT BY THE DRASTIC DROP IN US MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO SOUTH VIET-NAM.

3. OUR ESTIMATE OF THE PHUOC BINH OPERATION IS THAT, FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE NVA ATTACK TO PHUOC BINH'S FINAL FALL, THE DEFENSE WAS ABLY CONDUCTED AGAINST GREAT ODDS. IN FACT, IT IS A TESTIMONY TO THE BRAVERY OF THE TROOPS INVOLVED THAT THEY WERE ABLE TO HOLD OUT FOR SEVEN DAYS IN THE FACE OF OVERWHELMING NVA PRESSURE. IT IS EVEN MORE AMAZING THAT ONE THOUSAND SOUTH VIETNAMESE SOLDIERS HAVE FOUND THEIR WAY OUT OF PHUOC LONG TO THE GVN SIDE. DEFENDERS NUMBERED BETWEEN 1500 AND 2000; NORTH VIETNAMESE ATTACKERS NUMBERED BETWEEN FIVE AND SIX THOUSAND INFANTRY AND SAPPERS HEAVILY SUPPORTED BY ARTILLERY AND TANKS. THERE WERE INSTANCES OF OUTSTANDING HEROISM DURING THE BATTLE, AND, AS IN ALL BATTLES, SOME WHO FLINCHED. ONE NEED ONLY REFLECT WHAT IT MEANS FOR A TOWN WITH AN AREA OF LESS THAN TWO KILOMETERS TO ENDURE BOMBARDMENTS OF UP TO ONE THOUSAND ROUNDS OF ARTILLERY A DAY TO APPRECIATE THE KIND OF COURAGE PHUOC BINH'S DEFENDERS HAD. AS MARKHAM MIGHT HAVE POINTED OUT, THE VERY FACT THAT SOME OF THE ANTI-TANK ROCKETS DID NOT EXPLODE ON CONTACT BECAUSE THEY WERE FIRED TOO CLOSE TO THE NORTH VIETNAMESE TANKS IS IN ITSELF EVIDENCE OF COURAGEOUS CONDUCT ON THE PART OF THE DEFENDERS. WE HAVE NO REASON TO DOUBT THE ESTIMATE OF 14 TO 29 TANKS DAMAGED OR DESTROYED OUT OF AN ESTIMATED 35 COMMITTED BY THE NVA. EVEN IF THE KNOCKED OUT TANKS WERE NOT PHOTOGRAPHED BY AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE, THIS WOULD MEAN LITTLE AS THE NVA AT NIGHT HAULED CRIPPLED TANKS TO PLACES WHERE THEY COULD BE CONCEALED.

4. WE HAVE NO CONFIRMATION OF THE STATEMENT THAT THE HOSPITAL WAS CONFIDENTIAL

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BOMBED ACCIDENTALLY BY VNAF. THERE MAY WELL HAVE BEEN SUCH ACCIDENTS. ON THE OTHER HAND, UNLESS THE RANGER WHO SPOKE TO MARKHAM WAS AN EYEWITNESS OF THE BOMBING, IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT SOME OF THE THOUSANDS OF ARTILLERY SHELLS POURED INTO PHUOC BINH COULD HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE. AS MARKHAM POINTS OUT, HIGH ALTITUDES ON BOMBING RUNS ARE FORCED BY ENEMY ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE. BUT THEY ARE ALSO FORCED IN PART BY THE NECESSITY NOT TO RISK THE LOSS OF EXPENSIVE AIRCRAFT WHICH CANNOT NOW BE REPLACED WITH

THE REDUCED LEVELS OF MILITARY ASSISTANCE.

5. MARKHAM WRITES THAT BEGINNING IN MID DECEMBER THE NVA EASILY TOOK FOUR GOVERNMENT-HELD DISTRICT CAPITALS AND ONE BASE CAMP IN PHUOC LONG PROVINCE. WHILE DUC PHONG AND BUNARD OUTPOST WERE QUICKLY OVERWHELMED BY FORCES THREE TO ONE SUPERIOR TO THE DEFENDERS, DONG XOAI HELD OUT FOR TWO DAYS THOUGH OUTNUMBERED FOUR TO ONE OR MORE, AND NEW BO DUC RESETTLEMENT SITE HELD OUT FOR MORE THAN A WEEK. IN FACT, THE COMMUNIST CAMPAIGN TO SEIZE PHUOC LONG AND ITS CAPITAL REQUIRED 25 DAYS. DURING THAT TIME AN ESTIMATED 1128 NVA TROOPS WERE KILLED.

6. MARKHAM WRITES THAT BY JANUARY 3 THE FOREIGN MINISTRY WAS PREPARING A PRESS CONFERENCE TO ANNOUNCE THE LOSS OF PHUOC BINH. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT SOURCE MARKHAM HAS FOR THIS STATEMENT, BUT IT IS NOT TRUE. PHUOC BINH FELL JANUARY 7 AND TO OUR PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE MEMBERS OF THE MINISTRY SENIOR STAFF WORKED ALL NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH TO READY THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO BE MADE AT MEETINGS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS AND THE PRESS CONFERENCE THE FOLLOWING MORNING.

7. ONE SUGGESTIVE OMISSION FROM THE MARKHAM STORY IS ABSENCE OF REFERENCE TO THE FACT THAT THE CAPTURE OF THIS PROVINCE TOWN IS THE MOST SERIOUS NVA MILITARY ACTION IN VIOLATION OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT TO DATE. ONE WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT, ESPECIALLY AS WE ROUND THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT, SOME ALLUSION-- EVEN A BRIEF ONE--TO THIS FACT SHOULD BE MADE.

8. IN SUM, WE FIND MARKHAM'S STORY TILTED UNJUSTIFIABLY AGAINST THE GVN, PLAYING UP ASPECTS OF THE BATTLE OF PHUOC BINH WHICH DISCREDIT THE DEFENSE. THE FACTS RELATED ABOVE SHOW THAT THE GVN MADE THE COMMAND DECISIONS THAT HAD TO BE MADE AND THAT THE TROOPS ON THE GROUND, MOST OF THEM TERRITORIALS, PUT UP A STOUT DEFENSE. THE MOST

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SERIOUS PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED, ASIDE FROM THE SIZE OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE FORCE AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE AREA, ARE ACCOUNTED FOR IN PART BY REDUCED LEVELS OF MILITARY ASSISTANCE WHICH LIMIT ARVN MOBILITY AND HAMPER VNAF OPERATIONS.
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